



FUNCTIONAL ASPECTS OF THE SEX INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to identify the functional aspects of the sex industry in Sri Lanka. To this end, how the sex industry is operationalized, the impact of the industry on the society and on the existing social problems was studied. For the study, 50 sex workers in Colombo city who operated independently, on the streets, in brothels and in spas were selected by using snowball sampling method. Law enforcement parties, government and non-government officers who work in this field, clients and brokers were used as key informants. This descriptive study collected qualitative data. Field research, direct observations, semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews were used as techniques. The collected data were analyzed through narrative analysis by using the theories of Structural Functionalism and Symbolic Interactionism. It was revealed that even though the sex industry is considered a profession that is rejected by the society on the surface, its continued existence confirms its functional aspect. The industry has become a profession that provides economic, mental and sexual benefits to many and various parties, satisfying the needs of those reaching beyond the sex workers. Because of this, it is clear that the sex industry operates in various forms and in a more organized manner.

KEY WORDS: Sex Industry, Functionalism, Social Impact, Social Research and Illegal Profession

01. Introduction

Sex industry and the phenomenon of sex workers are considered to be the oldest profession in the world. In the context of Sri Lanka, even though the sex industry is considered as an illegal profession by many, there is an organizational structure within which this industry still operates in the country. It has been a subject of various social researches at different points in history. Many researches (Priyantha, 2010; Karunaratna, 1911/1962; Perera, 1956/1964; Rathnapala, 1990; Coorey, 2009 and de Silva, 1994) have highlighted the ways in which the sex industry works and the adverse social and health effects caused by it. The definition of the sex industry therefore, was based on these aspects from the different researches.

The term '*prostitute*' came into common usage in the eighteenth century. There are many definitions of the term '*Sex Worker*' that have been developed globally. Among these definitions, Overs' definition refers to gender and benefits; "sex workers are women, men and transgendered people who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, and who consciously define those activities as income generating" (Overs,2002, p.2). As a concept, '*Sex Worker*' could be defined as a person or a group of people who provide sexual labour in return for monetary or any other privileges (Amarasekera, Gunasekeraand Silva,2001, p.91).

Amarasekera further defines sex workers as people who are used to engaging in sexual relationships with people for a payment while flouting established norms of society. Thus, a sex worker could be identified as a person with the following characteristics:

- i. Willingness to engage in sexual relations with anyone.
- ii. Such sexual engagement should be with the expectation of monetary or other reward in return.
- iii. Such sexual engagement should be in contravention of established social morals and norms (Amarasekara, 2008, p.119).

By supporting the said ideas, Jayasuriya delineates sex workers as individuals who are willing to engage in sexual relations with people known or unknown to them, expecting rewards in return (Jayasuriya,1998, p.16).

In relation to defining the characteristics of sex workers, it could be argued that sex workers include people of all sexes and hence not only confined to women. However, in the public opinion, the term or the concept of sex workers is mainly used to address women who are engaged in sexual activities in return of monetary or other benefits (Cooray, 2009, p.18).

Accordingly, even though parties belonging to various gender identities engage in the sex industry, female sex workers have become the most noticeable party. In most instances, definitions of sex workers are constructed based on female sex workers. It is also made clear that supplying sexual service in return for pecuniary or other benefits could be identified as the sex industry and therefore, it is possible to note that economic considerations play a pivotal role in defining sex workers as well.

Certain professions, such as the sex industry, are often not defined in a positive light in the social context. The social control mechanisms establish ideologies and build the social ideology related to these industries. Through this process the positive impact of such industries is suppressed. The studies that have been conducted so far regarding the sex industry have often not confirmed the positive effect caused by the sex industry.

Even if it is not visible on the social surface, it can be indicated here that the sex industry has a functional aspect to the society. There is a lacuna in the area of work focusing on the ‘functional aspects of the sex industry’ and this article focuses on the aforementioned area of the sex industry.

02. Method and Materials

The research problem of the study focused on exploring the functional aspects of the sex industry in the context of Sri Lanka. This profession is an industry that has endured with the existence of ‘society’ despite being rejected by the society due to many socio-cultural factors. As such, this study examined the ways in which the sex industry is operationalized in the context of Sri Lanka. It also considered the impact of the sex industry on the society and on the existing social problems. The study primarily expected to build a discourse in the society about the positive impact of the sex industry.

Qualitative method was used for data collection. As the techniques used to conduct this study, the research employed field research, direct observations, semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews for the purpose of gathering qualitative data. This study was conducted in an urban setting in Colombo District in the Western Province. The sample of this study consisted of 50 sex workers in Colombo city who operated on the streets, as an individual, in brothels and in spas. The sample was selected by using snowball sampling method. Law enforcement parties, government and non-government officers who work in this field, clients and brokers were used as key informants. Narrative analysis method was used to analyze data.

03. Results and Discussion

The social system has a special influence on the formation of a sex worker in the society. According to George Herbert Mead, people’s selves are social products. Rathnapala explains the following reasons for an individual to enter into the sex industry: Lack of education, lack of abilities and technical skills through education and lack of real religious environment (Rathnapala, 2000, p.109-128). In addition, Pathirana identified some causes such as biological and social vulnerabilities which forced women into the sex industry (Pathirana, 2004, p.40-41). Diversity can also be seen in the sex industry, which is created by the influence of such factors. Here it is important to examine the organizational structure of the sex industry.

The sex industry is not just an isolated profession, it can be described as an organized profession. In terms of the operational form of the sex industry, it was confirmed that the sex industry operates in several forms in the study area, and the number of sex workers involved in the study in those particular forms is as follows.

Table 1
Forms in which the sex industry operates

Category of sex workers	Number	Percentage (%)
Street sex workers	28	56
Independent sex workers	12	24
Brothel sex workers	06	12
Sex workers working in spas	04	08
Total	50	100

Source: (Field Data, 2024).

Street sex workers choose areas around the streets to find clients, and choose small hotel rooms, small spaces attached to shops, as well as places where they live in (such as houses, rooms) to provide sexual services. It is confirmed that there is also a professional network within the sex industry. Three wheeler drivers, brokers, informal power holders, police officers, other street sex workers as well as family members help to maintain their professional integrity.

The sex workers engaged in the sex industry independently are influenced by the following reasons for engaging in the sex industry.

- Previous working experiences in the sex industry
- The need to protect professional confidentiality
- Career benefits
- Time limitations for the profession

Among the sex workers engaged in the sex industry independently, some sex workers (06 sex workers) had been engaged in the sex industry before as street sex workers or brothel sex workers. Since the professional experiences they received were not positive in many cases (such as strict control in the power hierarchy, unsatisfactory wages and sexual exploitation), they were motivated to engage in this profession as independent sex workers. Many sex workers try to hide their professional identity from the society. In such cases, they have chosen to engage in the sex industry independently as it was the most suitable method for concealing their professional identity.

The sex workers who engage in the street sex industry, in brothels or in spas have various expenses to bear in order to survive in the profession. These expenses include payment to the parties that provide professional security, to those that provide transportation, and to those that provide and/or keep on hold places to engage in sex services while they roam the streets to find clients. The places that are chosen to provide sex services are costly while the payment they receive for their services in an organized context is insufficient. The sex workers who practice independently have no such expenses and thus, are able to enjoy the economic benefits.

It was clear from this study that some sex workers are more concerned about the time period they choose for engaging in the sex industry. They allocate time to engage in this profession considering their other responsibilities and roles and therefore, having the flexibility and the ability to select their own working time was critical to them. For this reason, some sex workers have decided to engage in this profession as independent sex workers.

The sex workers working in the brothel or the spa is different from the other two forms of the sex industry because their engagement is in an organized environment. Therefore, they conform to a corporate power hierarchy and adhere to a set of corporate rules. Within this framework, they do not need to find clients themselves or to provide the necessary facilities just as in other professional settings.

The impact of the sex industry on the entire social system can be seen both in negative and positive ways. This article attempts to discuss the positive impact it has on the society. According to structural functionalism, both individual behaviour and group behaviour play a role in the larger society. Although sex workers are defined as a group

of people who perform a dysfunction to the larger society, it is clear that their professional behaviour benefits positively for many parties.

Here, the impact caused by the sex industry is examined in the following ways.

- Positive impact on sex workers
- Positive impact on the family system of sex workers
- Positive impact on other parties involved in the sex industry

The positive impact of the sex industry on sex workers

In order for any profession to have lasted over a long period of time, the parties associated with that profession must have benefited from it adequately, at the least. Especially in a context like Sri Lanka where the sex industry is prohibited by law, the sex industry is organized and operated in various forms to ensure that various parties involved benefit from the profession.

According to symbolic interactionism, subjective interpretations given by the individual are important in understanding a certain context. In understanding the sex industry, it is extremely important to consider the subjective interpretations given by sex workers about their profession and its benefits.

A unique thing that was clarified by this study was that the positive benefits that this profession offers for sex workers motivate them to continue to be engaged in the sex industry. Here, the economic benefits they receive from the sex industry can be seen as the main factor. They are able to achieve other conditions through the financial benefits of the sex industry. The conditions they achieve through the sex industry can be stated as follows.

- Satisfying the educational needs of sex workers
- Satisfy their basic needs
- Prepare the background of those who want to apply for other jobs
- Becoming an economic supporter for their families
- Creating future security
- Social class mobility (from lower social class to middle class)

Many sex workers turn to the sex industry based on the economic benefits they receive. Through this study, it was made clear that the economic benefits obtained by the sex industry are used to satisfy the various needs of sex workers. There were cases where

some women who have the ability and need for education but do not have the financial ability, have turned to the sex industry to support their educational aspirations.

“I am very good at learning. But after my father died suddenly, we suffered a lot. I realized that if we don’t learn, we will suffer. There is nothing to do, I sneaked out from home and came to this job. The money earned from this is sent home. It also pays for my degree” (22-year-old spa sex worker, 2024).

It was confirmed that 4 of the 50 sex workers in the study sample had turned to the sex industry to support their own educational needs. One of them worked in a brothel, one in a spa, and the other two were engaged in the sex industry independently.

Inability to satisfy basic human needs have led many women to resort to the sex industry. The satisfaction of those needs met by the sex industry can be described as a positive impact that the sex industry brings to the sex workers. Food, shelter, clothing and health needs are the basic needs that sex workers satisfy through this profession. In addition to this, the unsatisfied and hypersexual desires are also satisfied by turning to the sex industry.

Some sex workers do not work in the sex industry as their permanent job. Some sex workers choose the sex industry to help prepare the necessary background to move to another profession. In other words, some women turn to this profession to find the money needed to achieve the necessary educational and professional qualifications.

It cannot be said that all sex workers in the sex industry are women with low educational and professional qualifications. But all 28 sex workers in the street sex industry are women with minimum educational qualifications; they are not educated even up to Ordinary Level. Among these, 11 people have not received any formal school education.

“I didn't go to school. I can't even sign. I earn more from this job than those who studied in our slum” (52 -year-old street sex worker, 2024).

Not all street sex workers have formal professional qualifications, and most of their professional experience is informal. They have engaged in jobs such as cleaning jobs and domestic helper jobs that do not necessarily require professional qualifications. For such women, the sex industry is also a profession that does not require any professional and educational qualifications that can earn them an income that satisfies them.

Most sex workers have an idea of future security. It is clear that they have taken various measures to ensure their future security with the money they earn through the sex industry.

“We cannot do this job every day. Therefore, we think about the future and save a part of what we earn for the future” (42-year-old brothel sex worker, 2024).

Making stable savings, securing residences, acquiring the necessary qualifications for other jobs for the future and investing money in someone for their future guardianship are some of the actions they take to ensure their future stability.

Sex workers in the street sex industry are not willing to leave the social class they belong to. But it is clear that the middle class sex workers have moved up in their own social class based on the economic benefits they get from the sex industry. They see a systematic positive change in their way of life compared to what it was before.

Positive impact on the family system of sex workers

Family members of sex workers can be mentioned as another unique party that benefits from the sex industry. Here, sex workers’ husbands, children, parents as well as siblings can be mentioned. Some sex workers turn to the sex industry because there is no one to provide economic strength in the family or because of the loss of the economic strength received from the other parties who have provided economic strength to the family. That is, when the person who bears the economic responsibility of the family dies, falls ill or loses contact with the family, the women unexpectedly find themselves having to bear the economic burden of their family. Such women may turn to the sex industry. The fact that the situation was unexpected pushes some women to turn to the sex industry because of the possibility of going into this profession without any qualifications.

“My husband left me and my child and went with another woman. When I go and ask for money, he beat me and drives me away. There was nothing to do at that time because I never had a job. I went with an older brother I know. Later I was not afraid to do this job” (33-year-old sex worker who practiced individually, 2024).

In these cases, the sex workers become the member of the family that provides economic strength. The family needs that are met through the earnings from the sex industry can be stated as follows.

- Satisfying basic needs
- Spending on the health needs of family members
- Investing money for children's education
- Arranging residences to settle the family
- Creating property and savings for family members
- Solving family financial problems by settling family debts
- Spending money for other needs like marriage of children or brothers and sisters,
- Arranging job opportunities
- Spending on family leisure and entertainment

According to this, it is clear that sex workers use the money they earn from engaging in the sex industry not only for their own needs but also for the needs of their family members.

Positive impact on other parties involved in the sex industry

Many and various people are connected in/to the operation of the sex industry. The industry exists with a professional network. Although they are informal professional relationships, they are often relationships based on professional benefits. In relation to the findings of the study, other parties related to the profession who benefit from the sex industry can be stated as follows.

- Brokers
- Brothel and spa owners and their employees
- Legal Parties
- People with informal power
- Clients

Brokers can be defined as a professional group that is directly and obviously involved with sex workers. Most of the brokers (4 out of 5 in the study sample) are engaged in other jobs besides the brokerage job. They are employed as three-wheeler drivers, shopkeepers, traders etc. They are thus associated with the sex industry as a method of earning additional income. Only one broker from the study sample selected this occupation as the primary occupation. That broker is associated with a brothel.

Brothel and spa owners and their employees are another party that benefit from the sex industry. Here, the sex workers who work in the spa or the brothel are the main party that provides the labour. Thus, sex workers can be identified as the driving force in these

organizations. But yet, in such organizations, it is the owners that make the most profit. This form of the industry also opens up employment opportunities for other employees working in them.

“These places cannot run without us. But madam earns more than us. Most of the time, the money is earned from the tip, but the madam doesn't say anything about it” (31-year-old brothel sex worker, 2024).

The legal parties also receive income from the sex industry in both formal and informal ways. Research by China Sex Worker Organizations Network Forum (CSWONF) regarding police crackdowns in 2010 found that:

1. police abuses of sex workers are particularly evident in rural areas;
2. law enforcement is stricter on females compared to male sex workers;
3. female and transgender sex workers report experiencing violence more often than male sex workers; and
4. There are many illegal practices perpetrated by the police, such as entrapment, assault and rape (Lingping, 2011).

Thus, it is clear that the formal power of the social institutions established to enforce the law indirectly supports to sustain the sex industry. The police officers in relevant areas receive benefits continuously during the entire period of service. Although some police officers are not directly involved with the sex industry, they make various efforts to criminalize the sex industry for their benefit. The police officers and lawyers who deal with the legal problems of sex workers are entitled to formal professional benefits such as money, rewards and promotions, as this industry is prohibited by law.

“It is not easy to stop them. So, what we are doing is raiding. Because it affects our promotions” (Police Officer, 2024).

For the continuation of the sex industry, the sex workers are in contact with the parties who have informal power in that area. Often, the people who have this kind of informal power do not expect financial benefits from the sex industry, and they are no longer able to establish their power.

The party directly benefiting from the sex industry is the client. Therefore, it is important to consider the benefits they receive from the sex industry from their perspective. The benefits received by clients from the sex industry can be stated as follows.

- Being able to satisfy unsatisfied sexual needs

- Having space to satisfy sexual desires that are not accepted by society
- Reducing mental and sexual pressures
- Satisfying psychological needs like love and affection
- Safe guarding their family

Clients who come to sex workers are unmarried, married or separated from their sexual partners. The sex industry can be described as a means of satisfying the sexual needs of clients who are unmarried or living apart from their sexual partners. Some clients have chosen the sex industry as a means to satisfy some unexpected and deviant sexual behaviours; Anal intercourse, Sexual Sadism and Sexual Masochism are some examples.

The relationship between the sex worker and the client is not always just a relationship based on money. Some sexual relationships between some sex workers and clients develop into emotional relationships later.

“I came to her first to get the work done (sexual satisfaction). I felt for her very much. I can't tell her that she should not do this job because of her problems. But I won't go back to anyone else. I get everything I want from her” (Client, 2024).

Some clients choose the sex industry to alleviate their general life stress and sexual stress. Thus, it is clear that the sex industry has become a means of alleviating the sufferings of some people.

Malinowski suggested that individuals have physiological needs and social institutions exist to meet those needs. In Sri Lanka, sexual needs are expected to be satisfied through the legal family. Some clients turn to the sex industry as a solution to the problem of sexual incompatibility between husband and wife. Some clients turn to the sex industry to satisfy their socially unacceptable sexual needs while satisfying their socially acceptable sexual needs through their wives. This shows that the existence of the family unit is also supported through the sex industry. It is also clear that when the sex industry is able to meet the sexual needs that cannot be satisfied in legally accepted ways, it indirectly leads to the reduction in sexual violence and sexual abuse in the society.

04. Conclusions and Future Recommendations

The sex industry is a profession that has been a part of various social discourses over time. In a social context like Sri Lanka, the sex industry has been rejected by the social ideologies of sexuality. In the contemporary social environment where sex is only to be

exchanged within the institution of marriage, exchange of sex for money or other benefits is socially rejected.

Sex industry has also been viewed negatively through religious ideologies and legal perspectives that support the maintenance of social order. However, the ongoing demand for it has ensured the continuous and organized existence of the industry. It is clear that the sex workers are engaged in the industry in different ways by the fact that the industry operates in different forms. These forms provide sex workers with different ways to engage in the industry where the negative social impact is minimized.

The sex industry benefits the sex workers as well as various parties which have led to the continued existence of the sex industry. This profession has also indirectly contributed to the social stability. The sex industry, as the oldest profession in the world, is impossible to censor, no matter what social actions are taken. Therefore, the government should take appropriate measures to monitor the sex industry properly to minimize health and other problems that may arise from it. Finally, it can be stated here that laws and regulations related to maintaining the sex industry should be reconsidered and restructured with a long-term vision.

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